

# Political Failure, Ideological Victory: Ida Wells and Her Early Work

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The long Gilded Age, beginning at the end of the Civil War and the emancipation of the black slaves, ended with a nadir in American race relations and the height of white supremacist activity. This period also saw the beginning of empowerment for American women, who by the end of the age had earned the right to vote and had expanded the amount of wage-earning women in the workforce more than two-fold. One of the figures cutting across both trends is Ida B. Wells, a prominent yet often-forgotten African-American female writer. Beginning with her journalism and anti-lynching crusades into her work with feminism, Wells was an intellectual radical whose ideas on race, gender, and acceptable behavior would not enter the political norm until decades after her death. As a consequence, Wells's work was subject to widespread condemnation or avoidance and one of the foremost minds on race relations died with her work suppressed – often deliberately – by not only the white community but other black leaders. Her early work is focused on as illustrative of two historical trends: first, the tendency for “radical” thought to become more mainstream over time, especially on issues of race and gender, and second, the difficulty faced by non-whites and non-males to gain any attention for their work.

Ida B. Wells began her political career in Memphis, an urban center for the black community. Wells had travelled extensively by rail as a young adult, preferring to sit in the “Ladies' Car” to avoid unwanted male attention. For two years Wells sat without incident, but in 1883 a white conductor demanded Wells move to a lower quality smoker's car. Her protestations were met with hostility and the conductor, after a struggle and getting aid from other workers, forcibly moved Wells out of the ladies' car. Despite her claims that, as a lady, she had every right to ride in the ladies' car, “the color line had become the preeminent social divide in the South” and black women were “increasingly unwelcome” (Bay 2009, 47). Wells would recount that other passengers “stood in the seats so that they could get a good view and continued applauding the

conductor for his brave stand” in her unfinished autobiography (Wells 1991, 19). She stood in a tradition of blacks attempting to seek legal redress for wrongs, as would be famously successful in the 1950s and 60s for black activists, and had some initial success. However, Wells benefited from an often overlooked status, as judges within the South – and America in general – had argued that segregation by race was necessary and proper using the analogy of separation by gender that was widely accepted in all of society. Wells and her lawyer originally won the suit by noting that her removal from the ladies' car violated not her rights to the same accommodation as whites but rather her right to have separate accommodation from men, a luxury not afforded outside the ladies' car.

This event was the first of many that shaped Wells's attitude and perceptions. Wells “was shaped by a righteous rage,” wrote one biographer (Schechter 2001, 14). Her autobiography's title, *Crusade for Justice*, highlights Wells's perception of racial inequality as an injustice to be met with a burning passion or anger, as well as her strong sense of spirituality. Audre Lorde claimed “[a]nger is the grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change,” a sentiment that Wells would have agreed with fully (Lorde 1997, 6). Her anger rose when the railroads had resorted to attacking Wells's character in court, and swelled further when the Tennessee Supreme Court ruled against Wells and claimed her suit “was not in good faith” but rather meant to “harass” the railroad (Bay 2009, 54). Wells wrote in her diary shortly after the decision “O God there is no redress, on peace, no justice in this land for us” (Bay 2009, 55). Faced with indifference or hostility to her struggles, Wells noted with a bitterness and anger that even fellow blacks, especially those who were relatively affluent, paid little attention: “none of my people had ever seemed to feel it was a race matter and that they should help me in the fight” (Wells 1991, 20). Her frustrations and anger eventually drove her to journalism, where she was a frequent critic of the black elites who she claimed harmed blacks by not “exerting their talents and wealth for the benefit or amelioration of the condition of the masses” (Bay 2009, 72). This led to her job as editor at the *Free Speech* starting in 1889, a rarity for women but doubly so for black women. She continued penning fiery attacks on racial inequalities, including those in the segregated school systems that she contended had “few and utterly inadequate buildings” (Bay 2009, 76). Such

attacks were controversial within the black community and many black leaders found it difficult to support the growing militancy and radicalism of Wells. Wells, for her part, responded to such critiques with angry denunciations of “[n]egroes who persecute and betray their race” (Bay 2009, 79). Yet, owing to her status as a black female, many both within the black community and the larger South found it easy to dismiss her writing as irrelevant.

Anger drove Wells to national prominence. In 1892, following the lynching of three black males in Memphis, Wells published an editorial in the *Free Speech* stating “[n]obody in this section of the country believes the old thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women,” sparking a fierce retaliation by Southern whites (Wells-Barnett 1969, 4). Wells, having already fled north, received death threats and was warned to not return to Memphis. The *Free Speech* was abandoned and liquidated, with many investors having also received death threats and having fled Memphis, prompting Wells to write and publish a series of articles that would later become the first of her pamphlets on lynchings, *Southern Horrors*. Wells had engaged in activism before with her journalism, but her articles were largely read by a solely black audience and ignored by the larger society. Frederick Douglass, still at this time the most prominent of the black leaders, claimed in 1892 that “I have thus far seen no book of importance written by a negro woman and I know of no one [woman] among us who can appropriately be called famous” (Schechter 2001, 38). This is far from a reflection of personal bias by Douglass but rather shows the extent to which black women in the post-Reconstruction South lacked any determined identity and faced a double discrimination for their status as black and female.

*Southern Horrors* changed that landscape for Wells. Patricia Schechter called it “a point of origin in American critical thought on lynching and racism. The pamphlet’s refutation of the idea that lynching punished rape – Wells’s finding that less than 30 percent of lynchings involved even the charge of rape – became the cornerstone of all subsequent arguments against mob rule” (Schetcher 2001, 85). Part of the great appeal and strength of *Southern Horrors* was Wells’s deliberate use of solely white sources, particularly white newspapers and magazines, to avoid charges of bias or inaccuracy that would have followed and argument made based on black sources. *Southern Horrors*

also contained Wells’s signature “righteous rage” as well as her increasingly sophisticated views on the role of gender in race discussions. Wells considered lynching to be a crime perpetuated against three victims: the lynched, who were unjustly deprived of life; black women, who the attacks marginalized and who received no “justice” when raped by white men as mobs alleged the blacks did; and the supposed victims of rape, who had to deny a mutually-beneficial, consensual relationship with black men to defend their reputation. Wells recounts the tale of a minister’s wife who claimed to be raped by a black man, only to later admit that she “had hoped to save my reputation by telling you [her husband] a deliberate lie” (Wells 1969, 7). “[T]here are white women in the South who love the Afro-American’s company,” Wells writes, “even as there are white men notorious for their preference for Afro-American women” (Wells 1969, 11). She continued with a fierce denunciation of the double standards in lynching:

“In the same city, last May, a white man outraged an Afro-American girl in a drug store. He was arrested, and released on bail at the trial. It was rumored that five hundred Afro-Americans had organized to lynch him. Two hundred and fifty white citizens armed themselves with Winchesters and guarded him. A cannon was placed in front of his home, and the Buchanan Rifles (State Militia) ordered to the scene for his protection. The Afro-American mob did not materialize. Only two weeks before Eph. Grizzard, who had only been charged with rape upon a white woman, had been taken from the jail, with Governor Buchanan and the police and militia standing by, dragged through the streets in broad daylight, knives plunged into him at every step, and with every fiendish cruelty a frenzied mob could devise, he was at last swung out on the bridge with hands cut to pieces as he tried to climb up the stanchions. A naked, bloody example of the blood-thirstiness of the nineteenth century civilization of the Athens of the South! No cannon or military was called out in his defense. He dared to visit a white woman.

At the very moment these civilized whites were announcing their determination “to protect their wives and daughters,” by murdering Grizzard, a white man was in the same jail for raping eight-year-old Maggie Reese, an Afro-American girl. He was not harmed. The “honor” of grown women who were glad enough to be supported by the Grizzard boys and Ed Coy, as long as the liasion [sic] was

not known, needed protection; they were white. The outrage upon helpless childhood needed no protection in this case; she was black.” (Wells 1969, 11-12)

Such double-standards led to Wells's conclusion that lynching was entirely unrelated to the honor of white women, but rather “the whole matter is explained by the well-known opposition growing out of slavery to the progress of the race” (Wells 1969, 13). She further borrowed from what would become a hallmark of feminist discourse by describing both the viciously public lynchings of black men and the insidiously private rapes of black women as stemming from the same source. Schechter concluded that “Wells broke down the distinction between public and private crimes against African Americans” and that *Southern Horrors* showed “lynching and rape formed a web of racist sexual politics designed to subjugate all African Americans” (Schechter 2001, 85-86). The previously quoted passage from *Southern Horrors* illustrates this well; the private crime of raping a black child is defended publicly by the white community while the alleged private crime of raping a white woman is avenged publicly by the white community. Public actions are used to reinforce the hierarchy implied by the private actions. Wells had experienced this hierarchy firsthand as her work continued to be dismissed largely on account of race and gender.

Wells also began a discussion on the extent to which economic concerns dictated the lynchings. Wells noted that the lynchings that prompted her articles and later *Southern Horrors* were committed largely on the urging of a white grocery owner against his business rivals. “They owned a flourishing grocery business in a thickly populated suburb of Memphis,” Wells wrote of the victims, “and a white man named Barrett had one on the opposite corner” (Wells 1969, 18). Modern research has largely supported Wells's hypothesis that economic competition led to violence. “When low cotton prices frustrated southern whites in their quest for economic security, they lashed out violently at the subordinate black population... southern whites responded to economic stress by resorting to racial violence,” concluded researchers E. M. Beck and Stewart Tolnay (Beck and Tolnay 1990, 527). They further noted that “For poor whites, violence was a response to fear of black competition for economic and social position. For the white elite, violence prevented a coalition

between black and white laborers.” (Beck and Tolnay 1990, 528) This is highly reflective of a major difficulty within discussing the politics of the Gilded Age, as many poor whites disposed to populist or progressive movements were active in the repression of the black community and the apparent contradiction between progressive economic reforms and reactionary racial politics instead, as Wells contended, should be viewed as two methods of dealing with economic concerns and insecurity.

*Southern Horrors* went further in making open prescriptions of black self-reliance, calling for blacks to leave the South and boycott the business that supported the racist institutions claiming “[t]he white man's dollar is his god, and to stop this will be to stop outrages in many localities... the appeal to the white man's pocket has ever been more effectual than all the appeals ever made to his conscience” (Wells 1969, 22-23). “When Wells counseled blacks that wealth and social advancement were not agents of change in themselves,” writes Paula Giddings, “she was laying the groundwork for protest movements in a post-Victorian world where conflict had its place, where progress was not inevitable without political protest and action, and where language, not natural law, defined the meaning of race” (Giddings 2008, 228).

As with many of Wells's actions, *Southern Horrors* was met at first with great apprehension and condemnation. Whites predictably charged Wells with radicalism and fomenting unrest, but black leaders were not fully supportive either. One charged her with “stirring up, from week to week, this community” and blamed her for a “spirit of strife” (Giddings 2008, 230-231). Yet Wells remained undaunted and asked various editors for funds to launch a national anti-lynching campaign, in the spirit of her calls that the black community follow up their denunciation of racist practices with actual action against them. Wells secured the funds and became treasurer of one of the first organized campaigns against lynching (Giddings 2008, 231). These actions set off a flurry of activity for black women; “it was not until the 1892 antilynching campaign, initiated by religious activists and journalist Ida B. Wells-Barnett, that a rudimentary nationwide interactional network arose among local clubs to coordinate a national clubwomen’s movement to pursue multiple social reforms...” Johnny Williams writes, and “[t]hree years after creating these networks, church clubs in twelve



states merged to form the National Federation of Afro-American Women (NFAAW)” (Williams 2003, 165). While these did little to change the immediate status of blacks or black women, as with most of Wells's work, the lack of political success did not deter Wells from having intellectual influence on the black community.

An important aspect of these black women's clubs were a strong religious backing. This religious nature was deliberate by Wells, who had a strong sense of spirituality instilled by her parents during her childhood. For the black community, religion was one of the few shared cultural institutions that remained during slavery and emancipation. Further, as Williams notes, “women’s church work fostered the creation of interpersonal bonds of cooperation, meaning, confidence, and obligation that engendered in them political efficacy” (Williams 2003, 167). Wells noted this herself and wrote that her pamphlet and subsequent speech at Lyric Hall, New York, over its contents were “the real beginning of the club movement” and caused “the proliferation of clubs that led to the first national organization of African American women” (Giddings 2008, 238). Wells's religious nature stood in stark contrast to many black leaders, who expressed skepticism over the role of the black church and saw it as another tool of repressing black activism. “The Negro church of to-day is the social center of Negro life in the United States,” W. E. B. Du Bois concedes, but contends that the church is at least in part responsible for the lower status of the black community (Du Bois 1994, 119). “The Home was ruined under the very shadow of the Church, white and black; here habits of shiftlessness took root, and sullen hopelessness replaced hopeful strife,” claimed Du Bois, further stating that “religion, instead of a worship, is a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather than a faith” (Du Bois 1994, 123-4). This stands in stark contrast to Wells, who used religion as an organizing tool, a motif in her writings and speeches, and deliberately would speak at churches and religious events to reach a larger community.

Wells's rise to national prominence was helped along by Frederick Douglass, who reversed from his previous position that he had “thus far seen no book of importance written by a negro woman,” (Schechter 2001, 38) and now claimed of *Southern Horrors* that “[t]here has been no word equal to in its convincing powers,” a statement that he would

repeat in a letter used as a foreword to publications of *Southern Horrors* (Wells 1969, 3). Douglass's support did not immediately help Wells reach a larger audience, as when he arranged for her to speak at his home church, few outside of Douglass's family attended. One explanation for the low attendance came from the timing: “her appearance was scheduled just before what promised to be a tough election for the Republicans, and the seasonal jockeying of black politicians in the capital did not augur well for their presence at an engagement where Ida, who habitually pounded on the 'Party of Lincoln,' was speaking” (Giddings 2008, 243). However, as Paula Giddings noted, a more apt explanation was simply Wells's comparative radicalism. “Though Wells's courageous defense of the race was widely admired, there was less enthusiasm in many quarters about her rhetoric and strategies that challenged traditional notions of women's activism and behavior... [d]ignity, for the disputatious Wells, came through the authentic voice of militant protest” (Giddings 2008, 244). Wells was a politically active black woman at a time where both blacks and women were largely expected to be docile and unconcerned about a system dominated by white men, and this in large part explains her lack of political victories despite strong intellectual influence on later black writers and activists.

Eventually, Wells's growing activism brought her to England to speak and organize an English anti-lynching league. Here, Wells's racial activity first brought her in contact with the issues of gender and the feminist activism. White suffragette leaders had condemned the gender bias within the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which expanded the vote to black men as women – both black and white – still had no rights to suffrage. Frances Willard was especially critical as she saw black male suffrage as being contrary not only to the goals of the suffragette movement but also her work in the temperance movement. “Better whiskey and more of it' is the rallying cry of great, dark-faced mobs,” Willard once claimed, further stating that “safety of [white] women, of childhood, of the home, is menaced in a thousand localities” (Fields-White 2011). Willard even claimed “the colored race multiplies like the locusts of Egypt” and that alcohol and the tavern “is the Negro's center of power” (Fields-White 2011). Wells, when campaigning in England on the issue of anti-lynching, quoted Willard's statements as evidence

of how great the hostility to the black community had grown in America. Willard, for her part, did little to defend herself against such accusations and inveighed against the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment as a defense. Willard claimed suffrage should not be extended to “the plantation Negro who can neither read nor write, whose ideas are bounded by the fence of his own field” (Bay 2009, 188). Wells charged Willard, and her frequent supporter Lady Somerset, with placing their own status above the lives of the black community: “after some preliminary remarks on the terrible subject of lynching, Miss Willard laughingly replies by cracking a joke. And the concluding sentence of the interview shows the object is not to determine how best they may help the negro who is being hanged, shot, and burned, but 'to guard Miss Willard's reputation'” (Bay 2009, 188). British leaders rallied around Wells, and the Duke of Argyll, along with Liberal members of Parliament and the Arch-Bishop of Canterbury, created the British Anti-Lynching Committee, which ultimately had greater impact on the political success of the anti-lynching campaign than Wells ever managed. This was not entirely by accident, as Wells had assumed that a British league, with heading by Anglican men, would be vastly more effective at pressuring white males across America than any number of black activists.

The visit to England highlights two of the great yet unfortunate trends in Wells's life. The first is that Wells, for the strength of her writing and the cohesiveness and clarity of her thought, was always more effective as an intellectual than as an activist and could accomplish intellectual respect but not political victories. Despite helping to organize the NAACP in 1909, Wells's name was at first left off the list of founders – a decision Wells claimed Du Bois was responsible for and had deliberately made (Wells 1991, 322). Even her works, particularly *Southern Horrors* and *A Red Record*, were important in the anti-lynching campaign, it was not until Charles Aked – a white Englishman – began publishing his own anti-lynching works using Wells's statistics that a larger audience was exposed to her work. “Aked lent his name, reputation, and white British male identity to give credibility to Wells's ideas,” claims Sarah Silkey, “thus defusing controversy and bringing her arguments before an audience that would not have heard them otherwise” (Silkey 2006, 105). Silkey concludes “without Aked's efforts to disguise Wells's antilynching rhetoric as his own work, neither the

editor of the *Economist* nor that of the *Spectator* would have been inspired to condemn lynching” (Silkey 2006, 106). Wells, for the great contributions she made to the racial discussion, had little ability to be taken seriously by those outside of the black community and even those in the black community that were comparatively moderate.

This in great part was due to the second issue of Wells's life, that as both a black and female author Wells was cast out of most spheres – especially as Wells cast her work as looking for both racial and gender empowerment and equality. Wells “insisted that woman [sic] suffrage was vital” and her work was radical in “[l]inking disenfranchisement to rape and lynching of African Americans” (Feimster 2009, 214). Wells was hardly alone in this view, as many black female writers of the time made similar statements, as Hazel Carby noted. “Though the Afro-American cultural and literary history commonly regards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in terms of great men, as the Age of Washington and Du Bois, marginalizing the political contributions of black women, these were the years of the first flowering of black women's autonomous organizations and a period of intense intellectual activity and productivity” (Carby 1987, 6-7). Carby does make a concession that, while black women in general were marginalized during this period, Wells represented a special case because “she was a woman who refused to adopt the 'ladylike' attitudes of compromise and silence... an 'uppity' black woman with an analysis of the relationship among political terrorism, economic oppression, and conventional codes of sexuality and morality that has still to be surpassed in its incisive condemnation of the patriarchal manipulation of race and gender” (Carby 1987, 108). She was not just a black woman, she was a black woman who refused to ascribe to the standards expected of black women and thus rejected – at least at a political level – by the larger community.

Ida B. Wells remains one of the most *intellectually* and culturally influential writers of the black community despite her political isolation and failure, as well as one of the strongest critics of not only lynching, but of a wider system of race and gender norms created and institutionalized by a society that hated those outside the mainstream. While she has seen a revival in her status and a greater awareness of her work, Wells must be seen as a radical for her time whose work could strike

even sympathetic audiences as overly antagonistic and confrontational. She feuded publicly and frequently with the dominant white, male culture but also with those who were more moderate or reform minded thinkers on racial issues. The consequence is that Wells, like many radicals of her time, saw little political victories at her time or little support at her time. However, Wells can be seen in a larger context of many radical movements of this time that, while failing to secure any major political victories, managed to have a lasting intellectual and cultural impact that would lead to the later success of their movements, as well as representing the growing activism and awareness of racial and gender issues.

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